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Chances of students with disabilities to get a university degree at Charles University in Prague

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Abstract

The article aims to present the results of a quantitative research study carried out at the largest university in the Czech Republic – Charles University in Prague. Research data was obtained from questionnaires distributed to 127 disabled students. The results provide information on several crucial topics for students with disabilities: first, their motivation to enter higher education and choose a particular study programme; and second, barriers in the study process and mechanisms for compensating for these disadvantages.

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Keywords: disabled student; higher education; quantitative research; motivation; barriers; compensation

1. INTRODUCTION

Charles University in Prague is an accredited public university, and thus an autonomous scientific and educational establishment. Charles University was founded in 1348 and is one of the world's oldest universities. Today it has 17 faculties and more than 7,500 employees. Over 51,000 students, roughly a sixth of all students in

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the Czech Republic, study at Charles University in more than 300 accredited degree programmes and 660 study disciplines.

Students with disabilities form a distinct group amongst the student population at Charles University, most frequently consisting of students with a physical or sensory disability (sight and hearing), specific learning disorders, chronic illness or weakness, physical disorders, communication disorders or combined disability.

It is necessary to ensure that this potentially disadvantaged group of students, or applicants for study, receives equal access to university education and that comparable conditions for study are in place, allowing disabled students to achieve similar results in their studies to students without disabilities. The university's efforts in this area are realised through the systematic and purposeful functioning of support services and measures.

At Charles University in Prague, disabled students are classified as those who, due a congenital or acquired condition, require modifications of the acceptance procedure, study conditions, removal of physical barriers or other special modifications to University premises for the purpose of successful study (Urychova, 2008). A total of 139 students with varying types of disability are currently registered with the University. It can, however, be assumed the true number is at least twice this because, as of 2012, students utilising any kind of support service at public secondary schools must be registered as special-needs students. The obligation to register oneself is new for many students, who are, for a variety of reasons, unwilling to comply with this requirement.

In accordance with valid legal regulations (chiefly Amendment No. 2 to the Rules for the Provision of Grants and Subsidies to Public Universities 2012), students with disabilities are, following a so-called functional diagnosis, provided with a wide spectrum of support services both before and during their studies. Services are organised on a decentralised basis, i.e. a number of entities combine to provide them, on both a pan-university (e.g. the Office for Special-Needs Students of the Information and Advisory Centre, part of the CU Rectorate) and faculty (contact persons, special workplaces, advice centres, teachers etc.). services provided are generally divided into so-called key services and other support services. Key services include assistance during study, the digitalisation of study materials, translation from and into Czech sign language and information and advisory services.

2. GOALS OF THE STUDY

For disabled students, the acquiring of a university diploma can be a long, difficult process, one that can be influenced by a number of factors. The aim of the study carried out amongst disabled students at Charles University in Prague was to examine some of these factors in detail.

The research team's main areas of interest were several aspects of study involving disabled students, these being primarily their motivation to study and choice of field of study, a subjective and objective evaluation of student performance and an evaluation of barriers and mechanisms for overcoming them. The research study also looked at support services and their evaluation.

The study realised forms part of a complex system for the evaluation of support services provided to students in the course of their studies and based on current, valid internal legal regulations of the university.

This article shall present the results from only some of these areas. We looked at the factors that led students to decide to study at university and whether there was any difference in motivation to study at university between students with, and those without, disabilities. We also posed the question of how strongly individual motivational factors influence the choice of field of study, or, the role played by the student's own impairment in the decision-making process.

We further posed the question of how students evaluate individual barriers that they may encounter in the course of their studies, whether there are any differences in the evaluations of students with different types of disability and whether these barriers are on the part of the institution (university), student or social/physical environment. We subsequently focused our attention on factors and resources that support the smooth progress of studies and how important these resources are for students.

3. REALISATION OF THE STUDY

The realisation of the study was divided into preparatory and study phases. The preparatory phase included thematic research of specialist sources. Attention focused primarily on relevant studies from the Czech Republic and abroad. The research team subsequently put together a tool for future data collection – a questionnaire. Once this had been done, the preparatory phase continued with the realisation of a group discussion with disabled students, using focus group techniques. The aim of this discussion, which involved seven students with varying types of disability, was to gather the deeper views of students on individual research topics and verify whether the proposed questionnaire questions were complete or required amendment. Following this, the outcomes of the focus group were integrated into the questionnaire, which was then pilot-tested on the students who had participated in the group interview. This was followed by the research phase itself, which began with the gathering of data via the questionnaire, which was distributed to disabled students at Charles University in Prague.

4. SAMPLE GROUP

The sample group consisted of 200 disabled students currently studying at Charles University in Prague. The sample included students from all faculties apart from the 1st and 2nd Medical Faculties and the Pharmaceutical Faculty, which have no disabled students. The return rate of the questionnaire was around 64% (127 respondents). Respondents were structured according to type of disability as follows: 20% of students had vision impairment, 15.5% of students had hearing impairment, 17.5% of students had a physical disability, 19% of students had a specific learning disorder and 28% of students had chronic somatic diseases and weaknesses. 46% of the group were male and 54% female. The majority of students (62%) were studying on a bachelor programme, a third on a master's programme and 5% were studying for a doctorate.

5. METHODS

The basic technique for the gathering of data from the sample group of students was a non-anonymous questionnaire consisting of 26 questions, 6 of which were for identification and the rest meritorious. There were 9 multiple-choice questions. Questions were closed or half-open and one question was entirely open. Questions were primarily polytomic. The questionnaire took the form of an Internet application. Every respondent was assigned a unique log-in in order to fill in the questionnaire. Respondents were invited to fill in the questionnaire by e-mail. The questionnaire was adapted to the needs of students with sensory disabilities. Data gathered was processed using the IBM SPSS Statistics programme.

6. RESULTS

Motivation to undertake study at university was the first area addressed by the study. The importance of reasons that played a role in the making of decisions about studying at university was covered by a range of seven options, evaluated using a four-point scale. The results are shown in *figure 1*.

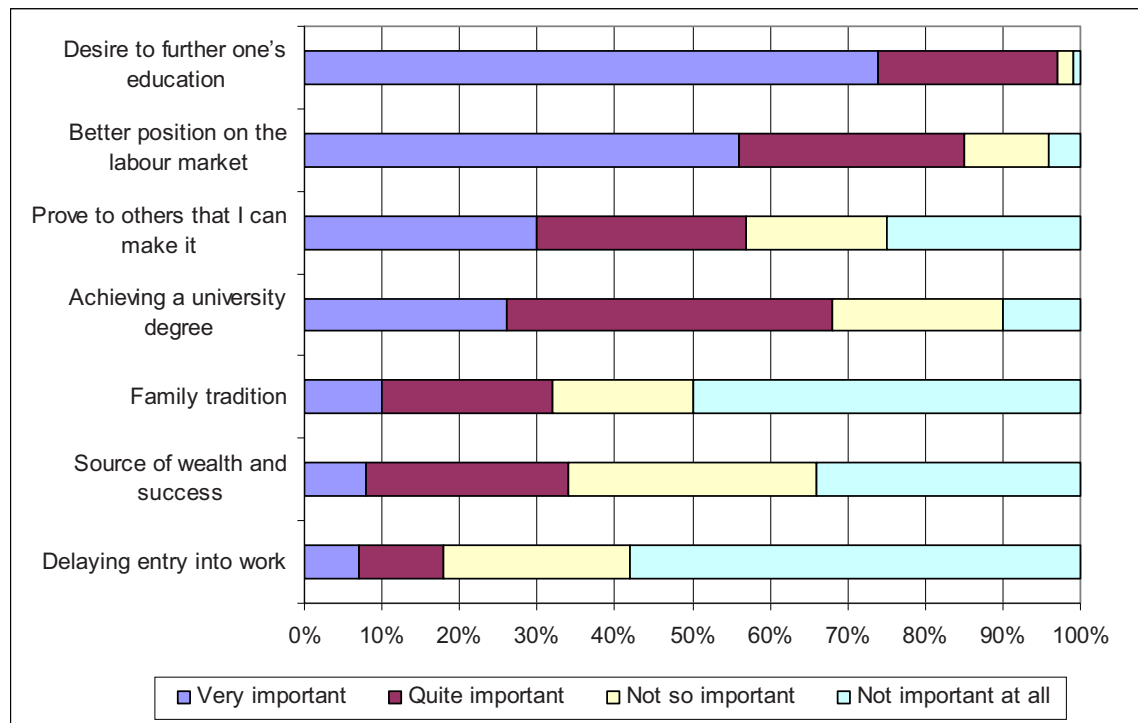


Fig. 1 – Reasons for deciding to commence study at university (%)

As expected, the fundamental desire to further one's education was stated as being very or quite important when making the decision to enter university by a clear majority of respondents. Only a slightly smaller number associated a university degree with having a better position on the labour market (85%). More than two thirds of applicants for study also enter university with the aim of achieving a university degree. The desire of more than half of applicants with disabilities to prove to others that they could make it at university, despite the limitations placed on them by their disability, can also be considered a very important reason influencing the decision to commence study at university. On the other hand, of relatively less importance as a reason was the perception of study at university as a means of delaying entry into work (19%) and a source of wealth and success (33%).

An evaluation of the reasons leading to applicants' choice of field of study is contained in *figure 2*.

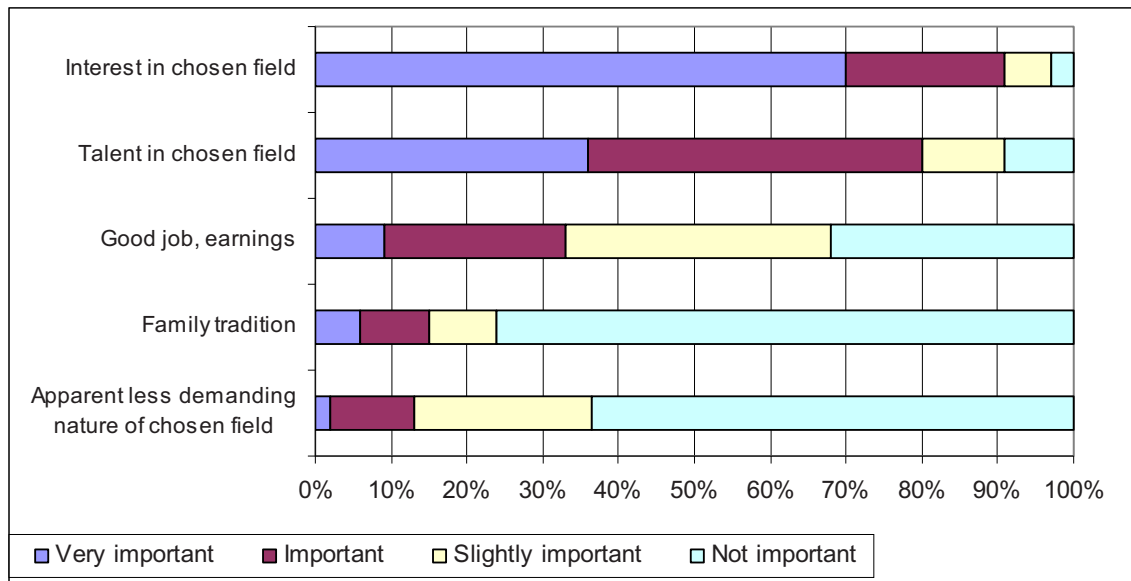


Fig. 2 – Reasons influencing choice of field of study (%)

As it can be seen from the figure, choice of field of study is influenced primarily by students' own interest in a specific field (91%) and individual talents and prospects (80%). On the other hand, the difficulty or otherwise of the chosen field is of almost negligible importance (14%). Study at theological faculties, in particular, is seen as being less demanding by applicants for study. No statistically significant differences were found on examination of other relationships between subject studied (determined according to faculty) and the reasons leading the choice of subject.

It is highly probable that the course of many students' studies will be affected, to a greater or lesser extent, by their disability. If we compare the influence of disabilities on choice of field and the success and duration of studies, it is the duration of studies that of most affected, followed by success. Students' choice of field is least affected.

	Definitely	Probably	Probably not	Definitely not	Total
Choice of field of study	23	17	32	28	100
Success of studies	24	35	27	14	100
Duration of studies	41	18	30	11	100

Table 1 – Influence of disability (%)

The above influences are, to a certain extent, affected by the type of disability. Students who stated impaired mobility or hearing were also most affected when choosing their field of study. Students with psychological disorders more often stated problems with success, due to being more frequently considered less successful compared their peers, and duration of study, most frequently citing the re-taking of exams and extension of study. Students with vision impairments also study for longer.

It is indisputable that, during their studies, disabled students encounter many barriers that, to varying extents, complicate their studies or, at the very least, spoil their experience. Most of these barriers are part of the social environment and must be eliminated with suitable tools. For the purposes of the study, emphasis was placed primarily on barriers in the physical environment, access to information and barriers to the integration of students into groups of their peers. We also examined the effects of disabilities on the duration of study.

To evaluate barriers, we formulated a series of phrases describing the aforementioned basic barriers. Evaluation was according to a four-point scale. The results are shown in *figure 3*.

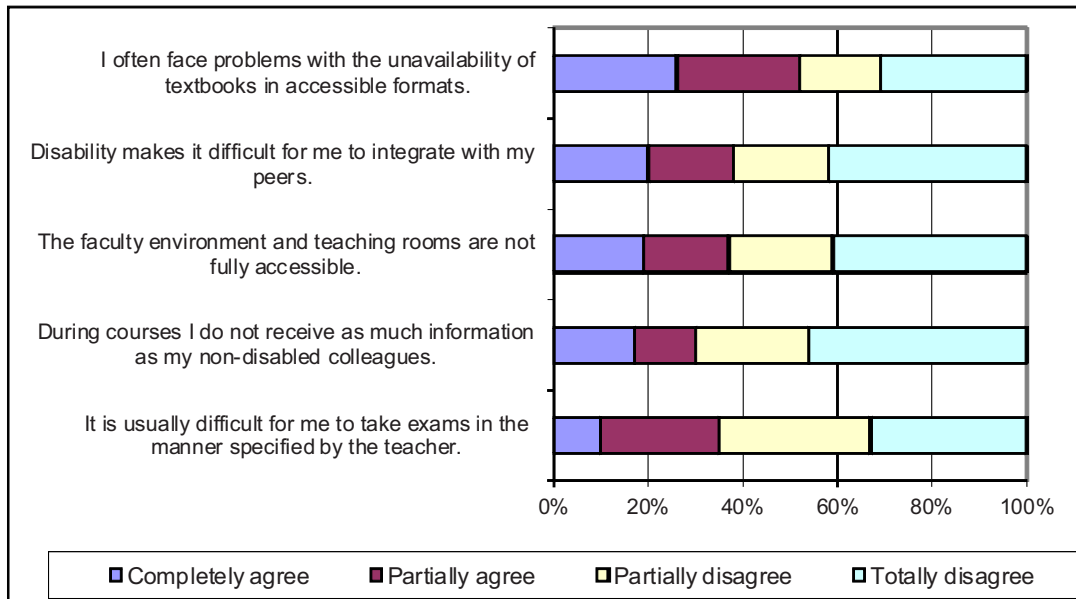


Fig. 3 – Barriers to study (%)

The main barrier, as evidenced by the study, is the availability of study texts in a form that meets the needs of students with different types of disability (51%). As expected, this barrier primarily affects students with vision impairment (agree + partially agree 84 %), followed by students with hearing impairment (70%) and specific types of learning disorder (45%). The availability of study materials can therefore be regarded as a general problem that affects practically all groups of students.

The next two barriers show around the same level of agreement – 37% and 38%. Problems with integration into the collective of their fellow students were cited somewhat more frequently by students with psychological disorders and sensory impairments. Access difficulties in the university environment appear to be a problem chiefly for students with a movement or hearing impairment. On the other hand, students with psychological disorders, somatic diseases and specific types of learning disorder face the greatest difficulties in sitting exams in the manner specified by their teachers. The final barrier is the reduction in the amount of information given to students during courses (30%). Logically, this problem chiefly affects students with sensory impairments.

Disabled students must overcome the aforementioned barriers either on their own, through motivation, hard work and application to study, or with the help of family, friends, colleagues and teachers, as well as, naturally, the use

of services offered to these students by Charles University. Preferences for the relevant sources and forms of support are shown in figure 4.

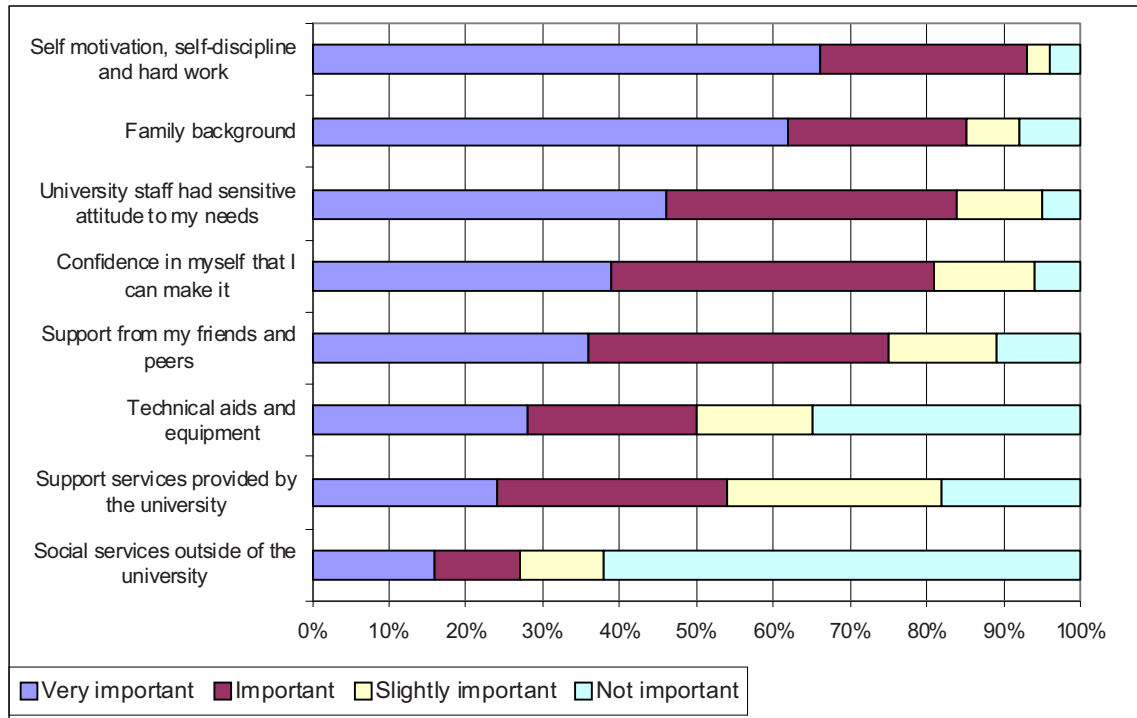


Fig. 4 – Sources and forms of support during study (%)

It is evident from the opinion of students that, during their studies, they rely mostly on themselves – on their own motivation, drive and hard work. Students cannot get by without faith in themselves and a firm belief that they will manage their studies. Of only slightly less importance to students is the considerable support they receive from their family, friends and helpful university staff (86%, 75% and 84%), and of comparable importance to students as sources of support during their studies are services provided by the university, as well as technical aids and equipment that students can use in the course of their studies. The least important factor for students in the overcoming of barriers during their studies are the social services offered by normal service providers outside the university. Taking into account the relationship between the source of support and type of disability, we did not find any statistically significant relationship. An exception to this may be the reduced level of support students with psychological disorders feel they receive from their peers.

7. Conclusion

Equal access to tertiary education is the subject of theoretical considerations and research studies and is viewed from a number of different perspectives. This study provides an insight into several key areas of university study as perceived by students with disabilities at Charles University in Prague.

First of all, the major influence on the course of studies and chances of their successful completion is students' quality and strength of motivation to enter university. In the 1990s and 2000s, many disabled applicants for university oriented themselves not only according to their interests and expectations when choosing a university, but also according to unofficial recommendations and experiences related to the accessibility of the given university and relevant study programme. However, students with a disability currently demand a certain standard of accessibility from the university of their choice (Michalik, 2011).

This assumption is confirmed by the study carried out, from which it can be seen that the fundamental influences on applicants with disabilities when deciding whether to enter university are chiefly the desire to further their education and be in a better position on the labour market. An important factor in the decision-making process is also the determination of applicants with a disability to show that they can make it and that they can cope with the demands placed on them. Compared to the student population at large (Prudky & Pabian & Sima, 2010), students with disabilities see university study to a much lesser extent as a source of possible wealth and success, or as a means of delaying their entry into the world of work.

When choosing a field of study, the most important factor for students with a disability is previous interest in their chosen field and their individual talents and prospects. On the other hand, the difficulty of the chosen field of study or family tradition are not such decisive factors. A student's disability itself is also not so fundamental in choosing a field of study. This fact is probably the result of more fields of study being gradually made accessible in view of the demands of students with individual types of disability. Similar sentiments are expressed in the National Plan for the Creation of Equal Opportunities for the Period from 2010–14, which states that the growth in applicants for study with a disability has necessitated a targeted, systematic solution for specific issues associated with the education of people with a disability on a university level, too, where the only possible option is the integration of disabled students into the mainstream.

Adaptation to university study and the continuous meeting of demands placed on disabled students by the academic environment is inextricably linked with the overcoming of a number of barriers. The main barrier to study at Charles University was stated as being reduced access to information, in the form of the unavailability of study materials in an accessible, most frequently digitalised, format, and further, the limited amount of information gained by students during lectures. Naturally, both of these barriers chiefly affect students with sensory disabilities and students with specific learning disorders. Difficulties with integration into the collective of their peers are experienced chiefly by students with sensory disabilities and psychological disorders. Both groups are also faced with differing barrier to natural social integration. Physical barriers naturally continue to be an issue for, chiefly, students with mobility impairments, and also to a greater extent for students with a hearing, rather than vision, impairment.

At the university level, the disadvantaging of students with disabilities is compensated for by a number of measures with widely varying practical benefits to specific students. Forms and sources of support can be divided into two basic groups – individual and institutional. The study shows that individual sources, including primarily their own motivation, drive and trust in themselves, are of greater significance to students, although social sources of support such as family members, friends, fellow students as well as university employees also play an important role.

Institutional sources of support include support services and technical aids and equipment provided for disabled students by the university. It can be seen in the study that support services are an absolute necessity for only a fifth of students. While these services are not an absolute necessity for a further two-fifths, study would,

nevertheless, be more difficult without them. As far as the use of services is concerned, there are significant differences between individual groups of students according to type of disability. These services are absolutely indispensable for students with vision and hearing impairments.

The very existence and continuous development of the aforementioned institutional forms of support at university level are, of course, an expression of the university's respect for the individuality of every student and the diversity of their educational needs. At the same time, it is evidence of the perception of disability in the context of the social model of disability, the development of which is, as stated by Oliver (1990), a manifestation of the fact that society is not capable of providing these people with adequate services, suitably adapting the social environment or, in another appropriate manner, satisfying the varying needs of those with disabilities.

Acknowledgements

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